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ABSTRACT

Although the constraints of time and environment under which most language learning is done mean that a natural language situation can never be reproduced in school, many of the findings from first language acquisition studies apply to second language (L2) learning. This would mean therefore that instead of stressing speaking in a beginning L2 class, the curriculum would be firmly based on receptive skills and that adequate meaningful exposure to the language would precede any attempt to train productive skills. As receptive skills are developed, a more prominent role would be given to developing and testing skills in fluency, appropriateness, and accuracy. The student would be kept continually active in the comprehension of a rich linguistic environment and in the creation of meaningful utterances, which are the primary means of language acquisition. (MSE)

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The language teaching profession today is more active, more self-aware and more self-critical than at any time in its history. It has also undergone a number of revolutions in pedagogical theory, an extension of its coverage into the area of languages for special purposes, and a major shift of intention or goal, from the inculcation of knowledge to the development of a skill: specifically, that of communication.

It is therefore with some hesitation that one proposes further changes, of which one, at least, is radical enough to amount to what Nord has called "a paradigm shift" (Nord 1978). However, despite the many notable successes of present methods, it is widely agreed that there remains room for improvement. Too many students emerge from language courses with a sense of failure predominant. This is specially true of short courses, in which they are unlikely to reach a minimum threshold of achievement in any skill, let alone acquire a feeling of mastery. The more gifted, on the other hand, experience "the sense of disappointment that creeps into second language learning from about the middle of the second year" (Howatt 1979: 18), and are frequently bored by the slow pace of progress.

One of the proposed remedies, energetically propagated by Altman, Gougher and others, is the far-reaching individualization of learning (see e.g. Altman 1972, 1977, Gougher 1972). While this has much to recommend it, it requires so much organization and is so radical a departure from normal classroom methods that it is never likely to be used more than peripherally by the average teacher. Furthermore, in an extreme form, the individually planned programme or learning contract runs counter to the principle of language as social interaction.

The major source of difficulty has been identified by several linguists (see Davies 1978) as the emphasis laid on speech training in audio-lingual theory, which sees language learning as learning to talk, and encourages the teacher to concentrate on this skill from the very first day. Most courses progress at the pace of the skills which are least rapidly acquired, namely speaking and writing, and pursue a carefully structured grammar curriculum of ever-growing complexity. As Howatt points out, "the

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need for semantic and content organisation to keep 'in lock-step' with syntactic development results in texts of restricted intellectual stimulation, particularly for the more gifted students" (Howatt 1979:18). The less gifted, on the other hand, are soon in a state of task overload, which inhibits further learning and weakens motivation. Moreover, despite the emphasis on speech, the individual in the average language class is given little opportunity for speaking, and most of what he does manage to say is repetition or rephrasing, usually of material from a school-book text, or in the form of a structured drill of one sort or another. He is rarely called upon to express himself creatively and fluently on a topic he finds interesting.

This is not a natural way of learning languages. Obviously, the constraints of time and environment under which the vast majority of language learning is done mean that a natural language situation can never be reproduced in school. Nevertheless, many of the findings of first language acquisition studies (see Clark and Clark 1977 for a review) are applicable to language learning per se. The language input which surrounds the child is not ordered in any strictly hierarchical way. So-called 'caretaker speech' is characterised by shorter sentences, a greater proportion of well-formed utterances, less subordination, a more restricted vocabulary and a more restricted range of topics than occur in ordinary speech. ('Foreigner talk' is similar in nature.) The child is immersed in language, from which his natural acquisition device selects its intake according to an inner structural pattern which is reasonably predictable as to sequence but can be very variable in time. After a period of absorbing the language impulses given by his environment, the child speaks when he is ready, sacrifices accuracy to fluency, and accepts correction only when he is ready to do so. He goes through many interlanguages in which errors are a necessary transitional stage.

What significance may natural acquisition have for the language classroom? To quote Wilkins:

> The learning mechanism operates through its capacity to formulate rules about the language once the individual has been exposed to it. The essential condition is exposure to the language, and as long as this exposure continues the learning mechanism will operate. What is needed in language teaching, therefore, is adequate exposure to the target language. The greater the exposure to meaningful language the more effectively the learner can formulate and revise his hypotheses about the structure of the language. (Wilkins 1972:172).

It is one of the contentions of the present paper that adequate meaningful exposure to the language should precede any attempt to train produc-

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tive skills. Exposure is, of course, not enough in itself; there must be motivation and active encouragement to learn, to formulate, however unconsciously, hypotheses about the target language. But a school language curriculum should place its initial emphasis on the receptive skills of listening and reading. Asher's Total Physical Response method is an excellent and natural way to start (Asher 1977). The course should move on as rapidly as possible, through forms of caretaker speech, to the use of semi-authentic and authentic materials which appeal to the natural interests of the pupils and offer them intellectual challenge and stimulation. A course which concentrates on understanding quickly achieves an overall view of the structure of the language without becoming bogged down in complicated aspects of accidence or syntax which are frequently redundant as bearers of information. A certain grammatical sequence there will be in the initial stages, but the most relevant sequence is that of acquisition, which will result from the efforts of the learner to understand the materials before him. As Krashen recognizes: "intake is first of all input that is understood. Indeed comprehension may be at the heart of the language acquisition process" (Krashen 1978:16). And it is the recognition that the focal skill in language acquisition is not speaking, but listening, understanding, which constitutes the paradigm shift so convincingly described and supported by Nord (Nord 1978). Not only does a concentration on receptive skills permit a much greater exposure to language samples than in conventional courses, not only does it allow interesting and meaningful materials to be used, but it also leads to a sense of mastery even in less gifted pupils, and in shorter courses, allows all to achieve a terminal skill of future value.

The present writer is now leading a project in Linköping, in which the first year of a three-year French course is being devoted largely to the rapid acquisition of reading and listening comprehension (see Davies 1978a and 1978b).

It is not, however, our intention to deny the value of training to speak a foreign language. Far from it. It is our expectation that speech will develop spontaneously in some pupils, and all will be encouraged to use the target language if and when they feel ready to do so. But speech in the foreign language will not be required nor will the demands of active speech training be allowed to slow down the progress of the course until the second year, when the transition will gradually be made. By this time the student should have an overview of the language, should feel reasonably at home in it, and should have acquired a considerable amount of vocabulary,

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which is even more essential both to production and comprehension than syntax. One can achieve considerable success in communication with a large vocabulary and a minimal stock of acquired rules of syntax, whereas the converse leads only to frustrated silence or inadequate stutterings. Vocabulary building is therefore the most essential task of early learning.

But where should the course proceed from there? What are the essential factors in communication? They would seem to be three: accuracy, appropriateness and fluency. Accuracy has long been the major goal of language teaching, and is concerned to give the pupil a command over the grammatical and syntactical structure of the target language. This is a valid and important goal, yet a course which lays too much stress on it, and is paced according to the acquisition rate of the slower learners, will not only tend to produce boredom in all, it will also expose pupils to too restricted a sample of language which will itself inhibit learning. A course primarily concerned with accuracy normally follows a structural teaching strategy.

Appropriateness has received increasing attention in recent years, and is at the heart of Widdowson's distinction between use and usage (see e.g. Widdowson 1978). The statement I am in perfect health, thank you is a well-formed example of usage, but a highly inappropriate response to the stimulus: How do you do? The realization of language as use involves the ability to select forms appropriate to a particular linguistic context and to a particular communicative situation (Widdowson 1978:6). A course which stresses use rather than usage will employ variants of the situational-functional-notional approaches embodied, for instance, in the Council of Europe's Threshold Level (van Ek 1975) and Wilkins' much-discussed book Notional Syllabuses (1976). And there is no doubt that a course which commences with receptive skills will find it easy to introduce situations, functions and notions in a natural way and richly exemplified.

The third factor, fluency, has received relatively little attention in the school syllabus, and yet is of major importance. We may define fluency as the ability to express oneself adequately and without undue hesitation in a given situation, whether in speech or in writing. (The terms of this definition need further definition in their turn, of course.) When language is actually being used, and not merely praticed in drills and exercises, it is not what has been learned that is important, but what has been acquired, to use Krashen's distinction:

> My model does predict that acquisition and learning are inter-related in a definite way, and that acquisition is far more central than learning in second language performance; specifically, we initiate utterances using our acquired competence for normal second language

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> performance, that is, our fluency in using second languages comes from what we have acquired, not from what we have learned. Learning does have a role, but it is a rather small one: It can be used only as a Monitor. (Krashen 1978: 10.)

For the acquisition process to function adequately in the classroom, the main requirements must surely be firstly, exposure to a rich language environment and active comprehension, and as a second stage, manifold opportunities to use the language in creative and motivating exercises, and in social interaction. The language classroom in which only one person at a time is talking is probably inefficient. Fluency training demands the extensive use of group work, where individuals can develop their own learning strategies, can learn from each other, and above all, can acquire language through using it. It is an often observed fact that some language users are very efficient at making maximum use of minimum knowledge, while others who in theory "know" a language much better, fail to communicate fluently. Practice in communication strategies and continued use of language in interactive situations are often more productive than further learning, though I do not wish to recommend the permanent acceptance of classroom pidgin or a fossilized level of interlanguage.

Accuracy and fluency are to some extent polarities, as Brumfit, among others, has pointed out (Brumfit 1979). Accuracy can probably best be trained in strictly controlled written exercises and language laboratory drills. Rule-giving may lead to improved acquisition if the student's state of knowledge has progressed to the point where he can absorb the rule, and especially adult learners find overt rules psychologically satisfying. What the experiments of Krashen and his colleagues seem to show is that the conscious application of rules in situations where communication is the goal is rare (Krashen 1978, Krashen et al 1978). In exercises which are devoted to training fluency, therefore, students should be allowed to make use of their acquired rules, however faulty their interlanguage, without interruption and correction from the teacher. The activity is its own goal, and such activity should be a major part of the language teaching curriculum. Busy, even noisy, small groups, should probably be a feature of virtually every lesson. The teacher should use different instructional modes to train accuracy and fluency, should be aware of the primary goal of the mode he is using, and should seek to maintain a balance which neglects neither the one nor the other and, of course, also includes new learning. Training in linguistic, cultural and situational appropriateness would seem to be possible in all modes and throughout both receptive and productive phases. The model in Figure 1 exemplifies possible instructional modes and their position on

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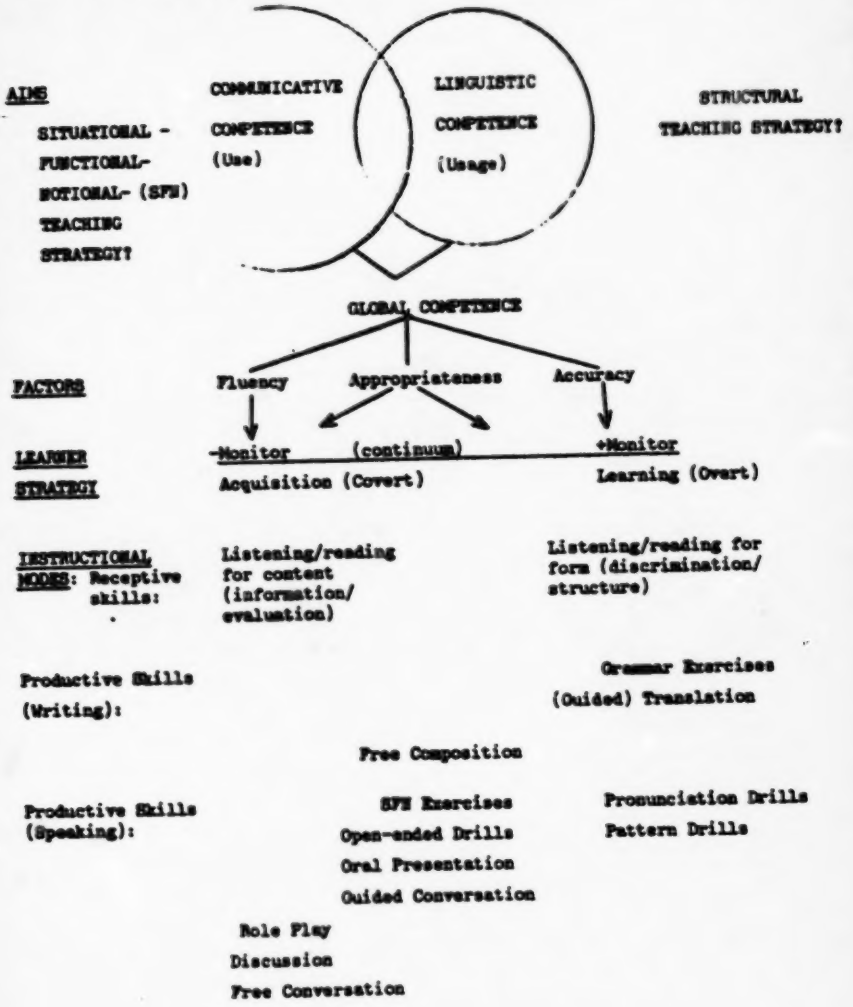
FIGURE 1. Language Learning Model.



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a continuum from fluency to accuracy, from minimum to maximum Monitor use.

In sum then, it is the contention of the present paper that a modern language curriculum should be firmly based on receptive skills, to which nearly all initial attention will be given. As the receptivity phase progresses, and during the subsequent productivity phase, the three factors of fluency, appropriateness and accuracy will be carefully trained, fluency being given a very prominent role, not only in training, but also in the evaluation of student performance. The student must be kept continually active in the comprehension of a rich linguistic environment and in the creation of meaningful utterances, which are the primary means of language acquisition.

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